



## Council of Europe Campaign to Stop Sexual Violence against Children Message from Gael, age 20, victim of sexual violence

### **Ladies and gentlemen,**

Today we finally have the opportunity to break a taboo which has unfortunately been present in our societies for many years. It is a scourge which affects all classes in our society. Nobody is immune.

The Council of Europe has brought us together today to initiate a broad social debate on the different forms of sexual abuse affecting children.

I was sexually abused by my father. My parents adopted me when I was only 13 months old. They separated when I was 2 and that is when the sexual interference began.

Progressing to rape when I was 8.

My story is unusual in that it was not violent rape. It was a form of perverse upbringing which made this abnormal sexual activity seem normal.

Until fear set in, the constant threats. The fear of death, fear of going mad. That is the burden we carry when we come to talk about our experience.

But who could I tell? Would anyone believe me? Would anyone be able to help me?

I was lucky enough to have a very receptive mother whom I could regard as my friend. It is often easier to talk about these things with a friend than with a family member.

At this point, other questions come to mind: What will become of him? What's going to happen next?

And the most frightening question of all, because we don't always have the answer, is "why?".

In this sequence of events, the hardest thing is the whole procedure which is set in train: I was interviewed 5 times by the police and 3 times by the judge, and 2 years later it was the trial.

At this point in your life, there are two possible reactions: either you sink into a deep depression because a whole childhood, the upbringing given to you by your father, is being destroyed, causing you to contemplate suicide and lose confidence in people and in life. Or you decide to get over it and turn this ordeal into a source of guidance and strength.



For my part, I wanted to get over it, a thirst for life drove me forward. But that would never have been possible without the help of my mother and the head of the child psychiatry department in Béziers, Claude Aiguevive. At this point, the first step is to accept what has happened to you, to leave your guilt feelings behind, because my thinking was “It’s my fault, I should have said no”. But I had to understand that, at that age, the way you think is dictated by the way you have been brought up by your parents, so why say no to a normality that has been inculcated into you?

I wanted to pass on this will to fight spirit to all the young people I saw in the psychiatrist’s waiting-room who did not seem to be really getting over it.

Children are not objects, and by mistreating them in this way you destroy their mental balance and give them a distorted view of sex.

On my 14th birthday I decided to forgive my father for what he had done in order to be able to stand back and free myself completely from the domination he had over me, and by forgiving him I was able to shed the chains which bound me to him.

It was at that point that the principle of resilience entered my life. I was set free, I could live. Being set free doesn’t mean I don’t suffer – I still suffer from my past today, there are some very difficult moments, but I know how to control the suffering and put it from my mind.

Children all react differently to this ordeal. But what is common to all of us is the loss of confidence in ourselves and in others. You feel dirty, you retreat into a shell, you are sensitive and you armour yourself against people’s violence, you cannot accept betrayal and injustice.

Resilience means precisely accepting that these events have taken place, and wanting to put them behind you and really live your life. A very important stage in this process of resilience is the trial: I am inclined to say that the punishment is not the most important part for a victim. The most important thing is recognition of one’s victim status.

The punishment, for its part, is a way of proving that society protects the victims and that these acts are not banal. At the time I wondered “if my father gets out while I’m still a teenager, will he be able to start on me again? Will he want to kill me for reporting him?”. Fortunately for me, when my father got out, I was 16 and 1m80 tall, so there was no risk. But what about the others?

The trial is very important, but it is also very distressing:

- the facts are recounted in detail;
- the experts go into all the details of the protagonists’ lives, even the most intimate;
- and the defence lawyer finds excuses for the crime and tries to put the blame on someone other than his client.



In my case, despite the fact that the trial took place 2 years after the facts were disclosed, on leaving the courtroom I was as emotionally destroyed as I had been at the start. It was as though everything had happened the day before. In addition to that, he had taken 6 years of my life away from me, but my whole childhood too, because between the ages of 9 and 12 the trial, the lawyers, the judge and the police WERE my life.

There are major shortcomings in support for victims in the post-trial period.

I only had my mother to face up to these things with me and so I had to cope and grow up faster than other children. The way I talked, the games I played, my whole life in fact, were no longer those of a child of my age.

Above all I was confronted with the nastiness and perversion of the world of adults, without being equipped to deal with them.

We should however note the progress made in this field in France: in the child psychiatry department at Béziers hospital there is now a special unit designed for interviewing young victims of sexual violence, which enables the child to feel more at ease, especially as the police are not in uniform and a psychologist is present. The interview is also filmed, which saves the child from having to repeat his story several times during the investigation.

I am now 20 years old, these events are behind me, I am still fighting the pain, but I have always wanted to get over it. I think life is worth living despite everything.

My aim today is to fight this crime. I have set up an association called "SOS Jeunes Abusés" (SOS Abused Children) whose aim is to prevent the different types of sexual abuse inflicted on children. We want to set up a helpline for children, but also activities to get them out of the vicious circle which would imprison them in their past and stop them moving on.

This is a problem today because attitudes are not yet ready change. It should be noted that our association needs funds to carry out these projects for children. I am therefore appealing to you in case you are able to help us.

I will end by saying that there is no element of determinism here. Either it is sexual deviancy, in which case it is paedophilia, or it is a compulsive urge, in which case it is a psychological disorder, but it is on no account hereditary.

This non-determinism depends on breaking the law of silence because that helps to put things back in their place. Daring to talk will be another outcome of this awareness-raising campaign. This will help to break the chain of crime.



If it is true that one child out of every five is a potential victim of sexual violence – and I am afraid it is – that means 1.2 million children and young people in France alone.

That is why I want to carry out this campaign, to encourage as many people as possible to work together to help the victims. Strength lies in unity.

Let us all unite together behind this convention, let us work to help our children.

Why, in our modern societies, in the age of human rights, are there still not more resources for preventing these different forms of sexual abuse?

Why, in a society which emphasises respect for freedom and respect for each and every individual, does one still see child prostitution networks and people in our countries who help to keep those networks going?

Is this the continent of human rights?

We are faced with some major contradictions on this issue. It is time to change all that.

For the good of the children, for the support the families can provide, for the help the abusers need, and for the good of European society, two duties fall to you, the member states of this great organisation, the Council of Europe:

- First, ratify this convention which lays down guidelines for legislation on sexual abuse of young people. In ratifying it, you will be condemning these acts.
- Secondly, raise awareness among young people in your respective countries through real prevention campaigns. Reach out to all those young people who have lost all, or nearly all, sense of value where sex is concerned.

Over half the incest victims questioned by the AIVI (International Association of Incest Victims) in 2010 had attempted suicide at least once. These are chilling figures, but they are very real. Those who govern us need to be made aware of all this.

Thank you for listening to me and, above all, remember that the child victims need you and that it is their future which is at stake today and is in your hands.

So make the right choice. Let us all work together and we will put an end to it.

**THANK YOU IN ADVANCE ON THEIR BEHALF.**

